

JFK JR. MULLED RUN FOR SENATE IN 2000

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A private poll in 1997 found that John F. Kennedy Jr. was by far the state's most popular Democrat, and two friends said yesterday they believed he would have run for office some day. Earlier this year, in one of the best-kept secrets in state politics, Kennedy considered seeking the seat of retiring Sen. Daniel Moynihan (D-N.

Y.) in 2000, friends confirmed yesterday. The idea became moot once First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton signaled her interest in running, but the two friends said they expected the son of the slain President eventually would have jumped into politics as a candidate. "He was dedicated to public service, and he was going to run for public office in the foreseeable future," said one friend who recently broached the subject with Kennedy. The friend spoke on the condition of anonymity. "I would have been surprised had he not run for office in the next five years.

" Kennedy, 38, his wife and her sister are presumed dead after the plane he was piloting disappeared Friday night into the Atlantic off Martha's Vineyard. Because of "the Kennedy tragedy," Clinton postponed a three-day upstate swing she was to begin in Elmira today as part of her "listening tour" of New York, spokesman Howard Wolfson said. The trip will be rescheduled within the month. In recent years, JFK Jr. had been on the "dream team" of top state Democrats, one of a few marquee names party leaders hoped to recruit for a statewide race in New York. Public Advocate Mark Green said the results of a private poll he reviewed in 1997 before he ran for Senate

confirmed why Democrats were hot for Kennedy. "He was by far the most popular Democrat in the state," Green said, declining to reveal who commissioned the survey. "He had the highest favorable-unfavorable spread; 65% of Democrats rated him favorably and 10% rated him unfavorably.

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" Although Kennedy never publicly ruled out the possibility, it was thought that he privately ruled out elective office for himself. The two friends, however, told a different story. The friend who expected Kennedy to seek office in the "foreseeable future" also told of speaking with Kennedy earlier this year about the Moynihan seat. "I asked him was he casually thinking about it, or was he serious. He sort of said, 'I'm not sure. Let me think about it.

' " But the second friend called Kennedy's interest "pretty serious," adding: "I think he was intrigued by the idea. . . . Would he have decided in the end to go for it? I don't know. But he was clearly thinking about it. He talked to a few people about it. Then the Hillary thing ended it pretty quickly.

" Former state Democratic Chairman John Marino was one of those who did not believe Kennedy's interests were in seeking office. But Marino had little doubt what would have happened had Kennedy become a candidate. "It would have been, 'Goodbye, anyone else.

' This is a guy who everybody recognized who would have had any nomination for the asking," Marino said. In a 1993 interview with Vogue magazine, Kennedy acknowledged that he had considered running for office "a lot," but added that he wasn't ready. "Once you run for office, you're in it," he said. "Sort of like going into the military you'd better be damn sure that it is what you want to do and that the rest of your life is set up to accommodate that. It takes a certain toll on your personality and on your family life.

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